

**“Ditch Your Gods” – John 6:56-65/Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18 - Aug 27, 2006**

I don't think it's made it into the Vancouver papers yet, but we've got a bit of a flap going on in our neighbourhood on the North Shore. The houses across the street from us border onto Mosquito Creek – well, to be more accurate, they sit on the rim of the ravine or canyon through which Mosquito Creek runs. After the disaster a couple of years ago when an embankment near Capilano College let go with a landslide both the City and the District of North Vancouver are reviewing similar situations to assess the risk of another landslide. I guess it should be no surprise, but at the very same time as this review is taking place, there are two more huge houses being built right on the rim of the ravine!

Our neighbours are nice people, at least the ones I know, and the rest of them seem like nice people as well. They're a bit upset and nervous about this flap, nervous because the assessment may turn up some threat or danger to them, and upset because they're going to have to pony up some cash to help pay for the assessment.

I have to admit that I am bewildered by their reaction to the situation. It seems to me that if you build your house on the edge of a very steep gravel slope that in geologic terms was cut by the stream only yesterday, then you simply have to expect there will be some more erosion, and corresponding landslides, and a part of your property if not your whole house is destined to follow some more gravel down the steep slope! I know, it's attractive to build on the edge of a ravine, because when you do so you can pretty much guarantee that nobody is going to build on that side of you, but there is always a risk in building there and I don't have a lot of sympathy for the owners when the edge of the ravine lets go. It's pretty much the same for people who build in a floodplain, and then complain when they get flooded (I won't even get into the issue of building on land twenty feet below sea level protected by man-made levees!)

However, we're all a bit like that, aren't we? I admit it – I'm like that, too. We think the earth is unchanging, and we expect things to stay the same – forever – especially those things that are important to us. Whether it's the land we live on, or the service we anticipate at our favourite restaurant, or music in a church service or being able to sit in exactly the same spot in the same pew week after week, we expect that the important things will never change, and we get nervous, fearful and even angry when they do change.

And change they do, because change is inevitable. The ground shifts under our feet, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes in huge earth-quaking shudders. The gentle drip of rain inexorably moves grains of sand from mountain tops to ocean bottoms. Plant species come and go. Animal species come and go. Tribes and nations rise and fall. Stars wax and wane, energy dissipates, entropy grows. Change is a foundational part of this universe in which we live, and is a foundational part of our lives.

To be sure, we fight change, that is when we're not ignoring it or living in denial. We worship the gods of stability whether in economics, in politics, in neighbourhood or family. For example, how many of the items advertised on TV and in the papers are to halt the effects of aging? (I used to know, but lately I forget – must be aging!)) Have you never joined in the chorus bemoaning, “Is nothing sacred? Is there nothing that stays the same?”

And so we go searching for stability, for somewhere where the “good old values” are unchanging, and some of the places we hope to find stability is in the church, the bible, our faith. “Aha! A bastion of sameness, an Eden unchanging! Presbyterian forever!” we are tempted to exclaim, looking to anchor ourselves to the unchanging past of our ancestors.

And then we come smack up against texts like the one from the book of Joshua and the one from John's gospel, texts calling for – yes, you guessed it – oh no – ‘change’!

As we heard, Joshua “gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem” Once they were there he summoned the leader, the head people, the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and according to the text they presented themselves before God – assembled in worship. After outlining

all the ways that God had been faithful to his covenant with Abraham, Joshua commanded the people to do something unusual, “put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.” Unusual? Well, think about it. These were the people whom God had served and protected, these were the descendants of Abraham to whom the promise of land had been made, and they were still worshipping the gods their ancestors served! Even so, God had not abandoned them, the command from Joshua was not conditional, he did not say, “put away the gods of your ancestors and then the Lord will love and accept you” but instead said “[because God has loved and protected you] put away the gods of your ancestors.” Against the constancy and unchanging love of God for his people we hear a call to the people to change, and they did – change, that is. They declared anew they would serve the Lord, they reaffirmed their allegiance to God in appreciation of all God had done for them.

What are the gods of our ancestors that need to be put away? Rules? Appearances? Hypocrisies? Aloofness? Exclusion? Racism? Society ranking? Power? I’m sure we could think of at least a dozen or two, perhaps more. But remember the call is not to highlight those gods, nor to give them power over us by causing us to either retrench or to be immobilized with guilt, but to put these gods away, to ditch them, and to renew our commitment to serve the Lord our God in the name of Christ.

And lest we get deluded by thinking this is all Old Testament stuff, way back in ancient times and of no significance for us today, hear the dramatic call from Jesus to an even more powerful change. While teaching in the synagogue (note Joshua was also speaking to the community in worship?) Jesus makes an astounding declaration that “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them,” a clear reference to the practice of Holy Communion in the church. Perhaps even more astounding was his claim that this heavenly bread was “not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died.” Now the NRSV translates the reaction of many of those who heard these inflammatory words as “this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” but I think the original Greek conveys a much harsher, even gutsier, message. “This is a hard, rough, abrasive saying – who has the strength (or stomach?) to stand up to it?” Yes, the images of a gentle and mild and non-offensive Jesus have their place and can even be found in one or two places in scripture, but the Jesus we see here is much more common – controversial, in-your-face, demanding no less than a complete change in faith and faith living, a message very much consistent with his name-sake Joshua.

There were some who couldn’t handle Jesus’ challenge, and they drifted away, mumbling and complaining, offended by his words. But there were many who heard his words of spirit and life, who ate of the bread of heaven, who lived in communion with him, and the church grew and the word spread and we are here today as part of that heritage, preparing with reverence to eat and drink as guests at the Lord’s table.

Now I’m no Joshua, and I’m certainly no Jesus (actually, my name James comes from Jacob), but I am prepared to echo both of their challenges to you. Ditch the gods of your ancestors, whatever those may be, and commit yourself to serving the Lord your God who has sustained and protected you every day of your life. Specifically, commit yourself to God in the name of Christ Jesus. You know we will be celebrating Holy Communion in a few minutes; we will also be celebrating Holy Communion on October 1<sup>st</sup>, World Communion Sunday. Today, I challenge and invite you, if you are not already a member of Central, to stand before the congregation on that Sunday and affirm your commitment of faith. I am available to talk with you about what this means in more detail – call me, email me, grab my arm, we’ve got five weeks to help you get ready – but hear that it is time for you to stand up and be counted among those who call Jesus the Christ and who call God the Lord almighty. I invite you to make that choice, to come and be welcomed as a professing member of this family gathered at the Lord’s table to eat the bread from heaven, to feast on the spirit and life offered in Christ.